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As the debate over the Iraq war rages in Congress, the Capitol Hill office of Rep. Christopher Carney is where fellow lawmakers frequently gather to seek free military advice.

"I think it's because it's somewhat of an anomaly to have a congressman here with a counterterrorism background," said Carney (D-Pa.), a lieutenant commander in the Navy Reserve who serves his monthly weekend rotation at the Pentagon's war room.

Currently, fewer than a quarter of the members of Congress have a military background -- the lowest ratio since World War II, according to figures compiled by the Congressional Research Service. That rankles some critics who argue that most lawmakers who vote to fund wars and send troops lack combat experience.

Besides Carney, one other congressman goes on active reserve duty while serving on Capitol Hill. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) is an intelligence officer in the Navy Reserve who also fulfills his duty in the Pentagon's war room.

"It's a great reality check for me because this allows me to sort of be very in touch with the 2 million Americans who are in uniform," Kirk said in an interview as he came off a recent 12-hour overnight shift. "Sometimes you can sense a real disconnect between Americans who wear the uniform and everybody else."

The disconnect also can be evident on Capitol Hill.

While military service used to be widely viewed as a requisite for running for Congress, the number of elected officials with a military background has declined steadily since the draft ended after the Vietnam War. Currently, 129 members of Congress have served in the military, including in the reserves or National Guard. Only one of them -- Rep. Heather Wilson, the first Air Force Academy graduate to serve in Congress -- is female.

Wilson, a Rhodes Scholar who received her master's and doctoral degrees from Oxford University before serving on the National Security Council, said her Air Force background has been a major help in sorting through acronyms during congressional debate about the military and national security.

"Everyone comes with their own life stories, and when people start talking about banking, I'm very quickly over my head. But for those of us who have worn the uniform, when folks in the military start talking, it's like they're singing a song we knew as children, and you don't really need to think to know the words," said Wilson, who sits on the House Intelligence Committee.

In modern days, Congress hit a high for military veterans in the mid-1970s, when nearly 80 percent of federal lawmakers had a military background. From 1951 to 1992, more than half of all members of Congress had military experience, congressional records show.

Downsizing shrank pool

"After the end of the Cold War, we declared a 'peace dividend' and shrunk the size of our military 40 percent," said Steve Strobeck, director of government and relations for the Military Officers Association of America. "That decision's being questioned now, when you see how much we're overusing our people. But I think people are realizing now that it wasn't just the Soviet Union we were on guard against."

The shrinking pool of congressional members with military backgrounds has proved to be a strain on organizations representing veterans and military personnel.

The Pentagon also has taken notice and recently overhauled its legislative affairs office. The makeover included orders to beef up staff of military and civilian workers at the Pentagon to more aggressively communicate the military's agenda and respond to requests for information from members of Congress while simultaneously learning how to climb the ropes of the legislative branch, officials said.

Plans call for an estimated 100 "congressional fellows" from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force to be assigned to various House and Senate committees on homeland security, foreign relations and veterans' affairs by 2009 -- an approximate doubling of current numbers. The fellows also may be assigned to defense, intelligence and appropriations committees along with positions at the House and Senate leadership offices, according to a Defense Department policy memo.

Still, Kirk and Carney admit they've had to walk a tightrope at times because of their support for the war effort.

"Certainly, the far left of my party is unhappy with my votes because I vote very similarly to Mr. Kirk, but I'm taking the votes I think need to be made for the nation's security," Carney said.

Whether more consensus would develop in Congress on tough military issues is debatable. The handful of members with children or other relatives serving in the military -- such as Rep. Duncan Hunter and Sen. Joseph Biden -- have differed on the best course of action even when the safety of loved ones is at the top of their agenda.

The emotional strain of having a son or daughter overseas played out unexpectedly at a White House reception last November for freshmen members of Congress. Sen. Jim Webb snubbed President Bush after Bush asked him, "How's your boy?" Webb, a Vietnam War veteran whose son is a Marine serving in Iraq, responded, "I'd like to get them out of Iraq," a comment he'd often made. When Bush pressed him, "That's not what I asked you. How's your boy?" Webb answered, "That's between me and my boy, Mr. President," before abruptly ending the conversation.

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Meet 6 freshmen with military on resumes

Fast facts about the six freshmen members of Congress with military backgrounds.

Sen. Jim Webb (Va.): Former Marine who served in Vietnam War before appointment as secretary of the Navy under President Ronald Reagan; defeated rival Sen. George Allen.

Rep. Christopher Carney (Pa.): Navy Reserve lieutenant commander and intelligence officer who worked counterterrorism duty in Middle East; defeated incumbent accused of extramarital affair.

Rep. Phil Hare (Ill.): Army Reservist for six years who easily won election to succeed longtime boss and former U.S. Rep. Lane Evans.

Rep. Patrick Murphy (Pa.): Former Army captain, 82nd Airborne Division paratrooper deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq; narrowly won election to Congress.

Rep. Joe Sestak (Pa.): Retired Navy vice admiral served six tours with Atlantic and Pacific fleets, commanded coalition force in Afghanistan and Iraq; defeated longtime incumbent targeted by FBI in contract probe.

Rep. Tim Walz (Minn.): Former Army National Guard command sergeant major, he served 24 years and is the highest-ranking enlisted soldier ever to serve in Congress; elected in an upset over six-term incumbent.

This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission guidelines